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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC 419-83
17 January 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: Charles E. Waterman, NIO/NESA

SUBJECT: Soviet-Middle East Policy Issues

1. The attached is a summary of my speculative thinking about what the Soviets may be up to strategically, as exemplified by the SA-5 deployment in Syria. In short, they may wish to obtain for themselves many of the capabilities for influence on both sides of the conflict that the US currently enjoys. This means enhancing the intensity, durability, and quality of their direct military involvement with Syria; opening a meaningful dialogue with Israel; and increasing their acceptability to moderate Arabs. These goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

2. Intensifying US-Israeli difficulties over Palestine and the Arabs generally would enhance the feasibility of a Soviet-Israeli dialogue.

3. I can think of no other consistent explanation for the SA-5 venture in Syria, which on the surface could be self-defeating for the Soviets.

Charles E. Waterman

Attachment:
Summary

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SECRET in its entirety.

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Attachment to NIC 419-83

Soviet-Middle East

-- Soviet strategic thinking in the Middle East revolves to a large extent around the desirability of reasserting a major role in the area. They presumably envisage the current American position as overwhelmingly predominant, and ascribe this situation to the following factors:

1) The military dominance of Israel over Soviet client states.

2) The area perception and reality that the US maintains the major relationship, and accordingly the only potential influence, with Israel.

3) Deep rooted US economic and, to some extent, cultural affinities and ties with area states.

-- About "1" and "3" the Soviets can do little. About "2", however, they may envisage transforming current realities as follows:

1) By direct, consistent, and forceful operational military involvement with Syria, the Soviets would become a factor to be reckoned with in Israeli thinking. The SA-5 deployment, probably with Soviet manning and obvious potential for Israeli preemptive action, is not explainable in other terms. Should the SA-5's be destroyed -- with both Soviet and Israeli casualties -- the Soviets would probably respond with deeper direct involvement. Our institutional thinking has been this would include pilots, more air-defense personnel, and possibly an air-mobile regiment. None of these moves would dramatically change the balance of power equation. Over time, however, given Israli definitions of the need for decisive superiority -- and intense concern for casualties -- the Soviets would become a force which could no longer be neglected. They would pose a direct threat to Israeli freedom of action in Lebanon, Syria, and in the air generally.

2) If by consistent force and their unequivocal role as Syrian protector, the Soviets arrive at a position demanding Israeli attention and concern, the Israelis and Soviets could also, under these circumstances, become to the Israelis something similar to what the US is to the Arabs -- the source of potential pressure on their regional enemies or enemy. While ultimately the US-Israeli relationship would inherently remain the dominant one, I am struck by the possibility of ad hoc accommodations on matters of mutual interest. The

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following quote is from a 1981 Tel Aviv University Center for Strategic Studies memo entitled "The Feasibility of a Soviet-Israeli Dialogue":

> "..even in a situation of contradiction of interests, there is room for contact between the two sides. ....it could emanate from ad hoc political situations in which they found themselves on the same side of the fence. It appears today that the Soviet Union and Israel have a common interest in promoting such contacts, and allowing them to become a constructive dialogue when the time arises, especially if the US-PLO relationship undergoes any marked improvement. ...Were the leadership in each capital to recognize the potential that such a step could bring them in the realm of realpolitik, this could occur. The USSR would then become less dependent on its fickle Arab allies, while Israel could learn the lesson constantly preached by other pro Western countries, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, that have used the threat of the Soviet alternative as bargaining chips vis-a-vis the West, even if Israel's position is indeed more delicate in the current American political arena."

3) Andropov may conceive of the Soviet "ticket" for entry into the Middle East power game as just that -- to become sufficiently troublesome militarily, potentially useful diplomatically, and flexible policy-wise -- to be attractive to the Israelis as an additional interlocutor. If true, we should anticipate discreet Soviet gestures towards the Israelis (or vice versa), backed by enhanced Soviet power status in Syria -- over the next year or so. Concomitantly, the US would be forced to take the Soviets fully into account in future political processes.

-- Several other factors affect this situation:

1) The Israelis, feeling US pressure on Palestinian issues, may be in a mood to reciprocate a discreet Soviet move for meaningful contact. There has been recent Israeli press speculation, apparently not officially inspired, about an official resumption of relations. Both Israelis and Soviets have an interest in defeating the Reagan initiative.

2) The Soviets are being entirely "correct" in their action vis-a-vis the Arab moderates. They have, for instance, publicly endorsed whatever arrangement the PLO and Jordan may evolve on Palestine.

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3) On Iraq, previous Soviet hesitancies to supply weaponry have largely ceased. This would appear consistent with an attempted reassertion of eminence in the Arab world. Although technically correct, relations with Iran's establishment are getting worse, not better.

-- In summary, it is possible Soviet planning is designed to change the Middle East equation, as follows:

1) Establish themselves as a consistent military guarantor of Syria, with direct military involvement, and capable of inflicting significant casualties on Israeli forces used to neutralize them.

2) Having done so, establish a dialogue with Israel, based on Soviet preeminence in some Arab circles. Specifically, its capability of influencing policy in Syria, with the PLO, and in Iraq would be attractive to Israel. Exploit Israeli-US friction over Palestine and Lebanon to the hilt in doing so.

3) Continue to stake out basically reasonable positions in line with the Arab consensus on issues such as Palestine - and perhaps succeed in establishing relations with Saudi Arabia.

4) In general, reemerge as a power capable of influencing: a) Israeli actions by steady force; b) Arab actions by direct military support and politically supporting stances.

-- If such a Soviet policy were successful, we may see the following within a year's time:

1) A solidified military position in Syria which, by steadily inflicting casualties, has rendered Israeli aggressive military activity against Syria futile - short of all-out war.

2) A Soviet dialogue with Israel, based on Soviet capabilities to influence certain Arab states, Israeli reaction to unwelcome US pressures, and increasing direct Soviet military presence.

3) A move towards establishment or strengthening of relations with moderate Arab states. This would include solidifying its arms supplier relationship wtih Iraq.

-- If these developments occur, the Soviets could no longer be ignored by us as a factor in the Middle East equation.

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